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ABSTRACT

Noting that observation forms the basis of all developmentally appropriate programming, this videotape helps new and experienced early childhood educators learn about children so they can individualize their program; evaluate programs so adjustments can be made to the environment, the curriculum, or both; and measure children's progress and their acquisition of new skills. The tape, appropriate for both self-instruction or group training, describes objective observation techniques, how to apply them, and then presents several practice observations. It includes segments on: biased reporting; learning about each child; measuring children's progress; evaluating a program; and observation segments featuring a water table scene, story time, and family dining. The accompanying guide to the videotape is divided into four sections. Section 1 of the guide presents the videotape script in its entirety so that trainers can refer to the tape in order to find answers to questions, and use specific text as a springboard for content-related discussions. Section 2 provides suggested approaches for presenting the videotape, including questions and ideas to discuss. Section 3 outlines a series of workshops trainers might offer as a follow-up to the tape. Section 4 presents selected resources for users who want to learn more about the topic. (TJQ)

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A Trainer's Guide to Observing Young Children

Learning to Look, Looking to Learn

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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A TRAINER'S GUIDE
to
OBSERVING YOUNG CHILDREN:
LEARNING TO LOOK,
LOOKING TO LEARN

Laura J. Colker

Washington, DC

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Laura J. Colker, Executive Producer
Bradley Hower, Producer/Director
Patricia Kasold, Program Officer
Jeffrey Long, Editor
Diane Trister Dodge, Script Consultant

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CONTENTS

Introduction 1

I. Videotape Script 3

II. Presenting the Videotape 15

Before Showing the Videotape 19
After Viewing the Videotape 23
Reading Between the Lines 25

III. Follow-up Workshops 35

Workshop 1: Observing with a Different Focus in Mind 36
Workshop 2: Using a Variety of Approaches 39
Workshop 3: Removing Obstacles to Observation 43
Workshop 4: Establishing Inter-Rater Reliability 46
Workshop 5: Interpreting Observational Data 50

IV. Resources 52

INTRODUCTION

The videotape *Observing Young Children: Learning to Look, Looking to Learn* is designed as a professional development tool for early childhood educators who work with young children in center-based programs and family child care homes. Observation is an integral part of providing quality child care. Addressing this subject in the September 1994 issue of *Young Children*, Ann Benjamin of the University of Massachusetts writes:

> As early childhood education continues on its present course toward professionalization, it will become increasingly necessary to highlight the skills, abilities, and areas of expertise that distinguish professionals from non-professionals in the field. Observation is one such skill, particularly because it is so closely associated with other professional responsibilities, including curriculum decision making, skill assessment, and developmental evaluation. . . . While the most obvious purpose of observation is to improve the classroom life for children and for teachers, practitioners also make a meaningful contribution to their professional development and to the development of the profession when they acquire this important skill (p. 20).

Observation is basic to everything early childhood educators do. It helps staff and providers **learn about children** so they can individualize their program. It helps them to **evaluate their program** so they can make adjustments to the environment or to the curriculum (or both). It also allows educators to objectively **measure children's progress** and their acquisition of skills. Thus, observing children is at the root of nearly all developmentally appropriate programming.

Observation can seem deceptively simple, but it requires training and practice to be able to observe objectively. *Observing Young Children: Learning to Look, Looking to Learn* can help staff who work with young children to acquire the skills to consistently and systematically observe in appropriate ways. It is applicable to:

- New and experienced staff working in child development centers, preschools or kindergartens
- New and experienced family child care providers

The videotape is also a useful orientation tool for anyone who does specific observation-related tasks with children as a regular part of their work such as:

- Education coordinators/supervisory staff
- Training and curriculum specialists
- Social service staff
- School-age and youth services staff
- Program directors

This *Guide* to the videotape is divided into four sections. Section I is the videotape script. It is presented here in its entirety so that trainers can refer to the tape in order to find answers to questions and use specific text as a springboard for content-related discussions. Section II provides suggested approaches for presenting the videotape, including questions and ideas to discuss. Section III is a series of workshops trainers might offer as follow-up to the videotape. Section IV presents selected resources for users who want to learn more about the topic.

Trainers are encouraged to adapt their training to meet the needs and interests of viewers. New program staff or providers may want to repeat the exercises in this video several times before they feel comfortable conducting observations. Supervisory or experienced staff may wish to use this video as a refresher course or to establish inter-rater reliability with others. Viewers can also use the tape on their own to build observation skills at their own pace. The exercises and suggestions in this *Guide* are adaptable to a variety of approaches.

I.
VIDEOTAPE SCRIPT

The following script is the exact narration heard in the videotape. The boldface headings have been inserted to make the script easier to follow.

Observation is a part of everyday life. Sometimes we observe objectively and accurately, other times our opinions influence what we see.

Video segment of biased reporter

While this reporter gives us a lot of information, it cannot be characterized as factual. She is giving us her opinion. What distinguishes observation from opinion or judgment is its accuracy and objectivity.

Clarity, accuracy, and objectivity affect the quality of news reports. They also affect the quality of our own work. Accurate and objective observations of children play a central role in ensuring a quality early childhood program. For classroom staff and family child care providers, observation is the basis for three program essentials: learning about each child, measuring children's progress, and evaluating the effectiveness of your program.

Think for a moment of all the uses observation plays in your programs, and focus on what your purpose is in conducting a particular type of observation.

Learning about each child

Conducting observations helps you know more about the children in your group so that you can plan your program to meet each child's individual needs, strengths, and interests. For example, you might observe that 15-month-old Desiree gets upset when there's too much activity going on around her. Knowing this, you can direct Desiree to quiet areas where she can look at books or play more peacefully.

Observation also alerts you to the fact that 4-year-old Sara is uncharacteristically throwing things and stamping her feet. Disturbed by this new turn in Sara's behavior, you might ask Sara's parents if anything at home could be causing Sara to act out in this way. When Sara's parents tell you they've just adopted a baby, Sara's behavior suddenly makes more sense to you. With this knowledge, you can give Sara the extra attention she needs and read her storybooks about other children her age who have also had to deal with the arrival of new baby brothers and sisters. Through your actions you can let Sara know that she's still very special to her family.

Measuring children's progress

Observation is an invaluable tool for measuring children's progress. With young children, it's probably the most valid tool we have. By regularly and systematically observing children over time, we can track their developmental progress. You can trace Doug's development of fine motor skills by observing him for several weeks playing with puzzles, painting at an easel, pouring milk at meal time, or using props during sand or water play. Observation not only provides you with a record of Doug's progress, it also helps you to plan your program to help Doug acquire new skills; provides you with information to pass on to Doug's parents; and gives you and others an indication of how successfully your program is meeting the needs of children like Doug. You might, for example, put out new table toys such as interlocking blocks and peg boards to enable Doug to practice more complicated small motor skills. When you observe that Doug can succeed at these more skilled tasks, you know that he is progressing in his development. By keeping notes on your observations of children's progress, you can show parents how their children are progressing and explain how important these beginning skills are to more advanced skills children will soon be learning, such as writing.

Evaluating your program

Observation is also a powerful evaluation tool for improving your program. By examining the environment, you can tell what works well and what doesn't, and then make needed improvements. For example, if you observe that children spend their time outdoors not engaged in any specific activity, as we see here, chances are that you have not set up the outdoor play area as a place that will attract children's interest. A digging area, a dramatic play area, and a gross motor play area quickly turn this backyard into a learning environment. Likewise, if you observe that toddlers are always fighting over toys or props, you might be able to end the squabbling by providing duplicates or similar toys or props, since young children have a hard time sharing their cherished playthings.

We can all agree that observation is important. But what are the best strategies to use in making observations? Because you work with young children every day, you are constantly observing them. You may feel that you already know a great deal about the children in your care and it's not necessary to specifically allocate time to observe them. But how closely do we <u>really</u> observe? Let's try a test. Over the course of our lives, each of us has probably handled tens of thousands of pennies. Take a moment and jot down on a piece of paper how you'd describe a penny. Imagine you were trying to describe the coin to someone from another country—what would you say?

Most people could probably report that a penny is round and copper-colored. If you are good at giving comparative information, you probably noted that the penny is smaller than a quarter and bigger than a dime. But how much further did your description go? Were you able to remember that the front of the coin shows a profile of Abraham Lincoln and that Honest Abe is wearing a suit jacket and a bow tie? Did you remember that the phrase *In God We Trust* appears on the top of the coin, that the word *Liberty* appears to the left of Lincoln's neck, and the date of the coin's issue is in the lower right? Did you mention

that you can feel the raised surfaces in the design but that its edges are smooth? Did you go so far as to comment on the fact that pennies have a metallic smell and taste?

You probably would agree that if you had a penny in your hand to examine, you could have given a more detailed description of its characteristics. That's because you would have been observing it first-hand with a specific focus in mind. In the same way, a focused observation of children in a specific setting reveals a great deal of information. Some people feel that focused observations aren't necessary because they live with children all day long and they can remember what they have seen. But as we have seen with the penny, memory is rarely as accurate as first-hand observations.

Good observations are accurate and objective. To illustrate what this means, let's try doing an actual observation—one that doesn't depend on memory. We'll be observing children at a water table. As the camera scans the scene, think about what you're seeing and hearing and how you would report your observations to others. Write down what you observe.

Water table scene

What did you focus on in your observation? Was your observation objective or did you, like the reporter we saw earlier, interpret what you observed? As we said earlier, the first and most important rule in conducting an observation is that you are accurate and objective. Accuracy demands that you are both factual and exact in your description. This means that we need to be as specific as we can in reporting what takes place, how children use materials, and how they relate to each other. The more specific our description is, the less subject it will be to varying interpretations. Ambiguous words like *crowded, too many, wild, roughhousing,* and *messy* are relative terms with no transferable meaning. To accurately describe a setting, we would count the number of children, give comparative measures, and

describe the arrangement of the area and materials. For example, rather than saying that the water props are inconvenient for the children to get at on their own, we might note that the water props are stored on the top ledge of the area divider and that the child who went to use them had to stand on her tiptoes and stretch her outreached fingers to get them off the shelf. The more exact we are, the better our observation results will be.

Objectivity goes hand in hand with accuracy. But how do we know if our observations are objective? One way to determine if you are really objective is to ask yourself, "Am I describing things in such a way that anyone viewing the same scene would describe it in the exact same way?" For example, if a group of ten people were to view the video segment we just watched and then read their descriptions aloud, all ten observations would sound virtually the same, if they were recorded objectively.

In addition to accuracy and objectivity, the second criterion for a good observation is to avoid interpreting what you are seeing. While it may be tempting to make interpretations of what you see in an observation, it defeats the purpose. Remember that the purpose of observing is to collect information in an unbiased way so that it can be used to give an accurate picture of each child and of how the program is working. Subjective interpretations, which are your opinions, might very well be true, but they can't be supported by what is observed. Some things that can't be observed include intelligence (how smart a child is), feelings (such as anger or happiness), reasons for doing things (she was provoked), or self-concept (he suffers from low self-esteem). These are all subjective judgments rather than objective observations.

When you observed the children playing at the water table, did you find yourself wanting to make subjective judgments? If your description included words like these, you were indeed being subjective.

Slide with these words: aggressive, enthusiastic, ill-mannered, annoyed, sloppy, boisterous, chaotic, out-of-control, mischievous

Your task in observing is to record the facts. Interpretation and evaluation of these facts come later.

Let's take another look at this same scene and go through the observation together. Before we begin, though, let's try to focus our attention on the purpose of the observation. This time let's observe the water table area with the goal in mind of evaluating your program. We'll do this by observing how engaged children are in the water play activity. As you look at the water table scene, write down your observations. When you're finished, you can compare your observation to ours.

Same video sequence as shown earlier

Now, here's how we described this scene. Follow along as we read our observation and see if you agree:

> There is a blue plastic water table with three dolls, a water wheel, a bucket, and five other water props. Six children in plastic smocks stand around the table. All but one of the children actively play with the props.
>
> One of the children at the table walks over to the room divider. She takes down a measuring cup from the top ledge. She reaches for the water wheel, but cannot grasp it. She reaches for it again, and edges it off the ledge.
>
> Each child at the water table is playing with a water prop. The boy on the far right switches positions and moves to the near left. He pours water on another child's prop and then on other children. Two other boys start to fight over a prop, each tugging at an end. The boy between the two fighters removes himself, walks to the end of the table, picks up a doll and plays.

> Another boy and girl, in smocks, come to the water table. Children use props to splash each other with water. They are visibly wet. One boy with water on his face asks who did this to him. The others laugh. Water splashing and spraying continue.

How did your observation compare with the one we did? Were your descriptions of the children's water play similar to ours? If both our observations were accurate and objective, they should indeed be very similar.

Let's go back for a moment to the purpose of this observation. From our observations we learned that the children wore smocks, and were able to use props without instruction. We can therefore conclude that the children were familiar with this type of play activity. Furthermore, on the positive side, having observed that all of the children actively participated and no one wandered off during the entire observation period, we might conclude that water play is a popular activity.

On the less satisfactory side, the children's play became more disruptive over time. Whereas children began the activity playing with props in an organized manner, over time, their play centered on splashing water and spraying one another. At the end of the observation period, the children were wet.

Having this information allows you to make changes based on facts. More frequent supervision and interaction with the teacher is called for. Allowing two children to join in play when the table is already filled cannot be considered a good idea. On the other hand, if you were to limit the number of children who could play at the table at any one time to four, children would have more room to become involved in their own play. Likewise, the number of props in the water table most certainly contributed to the escalating noise and activity level. Had there been fewer props, children would have had more opportunity to cooperatively play and interact with one another. As it was, when we

observed, children tended to independently play with one toy at a time. Socialization tended to be limited to spraying and splashing one another.

From just this one observation, you would have enough evaluative information to help you redesign your approach to water play and make it a more effective learning activity for the children. Repeated observations would then allow you to determine how successful the changes you made were.

Now, try doing another observation on your own, focusing this time on one particular child. For this observation, concentrate on the youngest child. He's the one wearing the blue sweat suit with red and yellow trim. Again, try to be wholly objective in describing what you see and hear. Avoid any words that indicate you have already formed a conclusion or made a value judgment. Conclusions and interpretations will come later.

Video segment of three children being read to by provider

Take a look at your observation. Did you avoid using words like distracted, uninvolved, or bored? Did you limit your observation to the facts—describing the child's behavior as it unfolded and the actions the provider and the other children took? While it's hard to keep from making judgments about what you observe, you'll find that, in their own way, the facts make a stronger case than conjecture and opinion. For example, suppose you had used a term such as "uninvolved." Someone could very easily dispute your choice of words, claiming that that's just your interpretation of what you see. But if you describe what happened—how the child turned in his chair so that his back was to the provider, how he held the toy bear over his face, and how he got out of his seat and walked away—no one can dispute these facts. What you've observed is not one person's opinions, but a recorded history of events.

Like most things in life, you'll find that the art of making objective observations becomes easier with time. Eventually, it will feel instinctive to record facts and avoid value-laden descriptors.

How often should you be doing observations? The answer is, "it depends." Usually you will be conducting observations with a specific purpose in mind—to assess a child's developmental capabilities, or gain a better understanding of why a particular aspect of your program isn't working. The main thing to remember in doing observations of this sort, is that you need to objectively report on what you are seeing at this point in time. No matter if Allie has for several weeks now been able to complete a puzzle by herself; if at the time you are observing her play she is unable to complete the puzzle, that's what your observation must report. Observations are snapshots that capture particular moments in time.

Since one particular observation may be atypical of a particular child or a particular aspect of your program, it's obvious that the more observations you make, the more accurately you will be truly capturing behaviors and settings. Let's go back to the last example we just viewed and run the camera a little longer.

Video segment that shows toddler walking over to the provider and interacting with her and the book

Observing this last segment gives us an entirely different impression of the child's behavior. Either segment alone gives us incomplete data. Therefore, in making observations, it's important that you observe for a sufficient period of time, that you observe regularly, and that you repeat your observations over time.

The information you gather from observations is helpful only if you use it for a purpose: to learn more about a child's development, to assess a child's progress and plan new approaches to enhance development, or to evaluate your program and make needed improvements.

Although having a purpose for your observation makes you focus your observation in a particular way, one observation can often serve all three purposes as we will see in the next scene.

Video segment of family style dining

What have we learned from this observation? First, we observed that the children in this family child care home are well on their way to feeding themselves. The oldest boy is skilled at pouring milk, taking bread off a platter and arranging the food on his plate. The middle child is able to get most of the milk into his cup. When he is unable to maneuver the serving utensils, he uses his hands to get needed food onto his plate or directly into his mouth. Even the baby—with the provider's assistance—is getting practice in feeding himself. With this observational information on the children's development, this provider can plan activities that will strengthen the children's fine motor skills and help them become more adept at feeding themselves. For example, the provider might put out laces and beads for the older boys to string and encourage them to use markers and crayons. For the baby, she might put out shape boxes or simple puzzles to play with.

In terms of program evaluation, we noticed two problems. First, the serving utensils were too large for the children to use successfully. Secondly, the provider repeatedly moved back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room table. This not only disrupted the meal, but made it impossible to have a relaxing conversation with the children. Knowing this, the provider can readily remedy these problems. Smaller serving spoons and forks would enable the older boys to get the food on their plates rather than the table. And by planning ahead to have all needed items on hand before the meal, the provider could make the lunch more relaxing for everyone.

As an early childhood educator, you'll find that by regularly making observations throughout the year, you'll have at your disposal a wealth of information. Observational information will enable you to see how

individual children are developing so you can plan to more effectively meet individual and group needs. The records you keep on each child's progress provide meaningful information to be shared with parents during conferences. Your observations will help you determine how effectively toys and materials are being used, what causes behavior problems to emerge, and why certain teaching strategies work well. Information gathered should be regularly shared with parents and colleagues. Each of you will have different observations which together will provide a comprehensive picture of every child.

Observation is one of the most powerful tools we have for improving our work with children and achieving a quality program.

II.
PRESENTING THE VIDEOTAPE

There are a number of ways this videotape can be used. As noted in the Introduction, the videotape can be watched on one's own. Using the tape for self-instruction gives participants the opportunity to do the sample observations as many times as they feel they need to enhance their skills. It provides users with a means of mastering the material at their own pace.

The videotape can also be used for group training sessions. This approach serves several purposes. First, it ensures that all have a common understanding of the material and minimizes ambiguity about whether or not observations are objective and accurate. It also allows participants to compare their observations with others and to establish inter-rater reliability. This gives staff (and supervisors) confidence that observations are being conducted appropriately.

In conducting a group training session, trainers may wish to use the entire video in one session or use it in segments. If there is sufficient time allotted (2 to 2-1/2 hours over two or three training sessions), and participants are already familiar with the topic, a one-time introductory session is recommended, with follow-up workshops as needed.

When training time is limited and/or the topic is new to participants, trainers may want to devote two or three sessions to the topic. For a two-part training session, the video can be shown up until the point in the script where the narrator states, **"Let's take another look at this same scene and go through the observation together."** (p. 8 of narration as it appears in Section I) This is the midpoint in the script. It is also a good stopping place in terms of content, since viewers will have gone through the water table observation once and had an opportunity to reflect on the process. After the first session, you may wish to collect and hold the participants' initial observations for them so they can be used during the second session.

To divide the training into three sessions, we suggest these breaking points:

- **"What did you focus on in your observation?"** (p. 6). You can conclude the session with a discussion of the water table observation from the participants' perspective. At the second session, have the group discuss the objectivity of their observations in light of what they've learned.

- **"Repeated observations would then allow you to determine how successful the changes you made were."** (p. 10) At this point, you will have walked participants through both observations, plus the comparison with the narration. At the end of the second session, participants should feel comfortable with the process and recognize the components of objectivity and accuracy. The third training session will conclude with observation exercises that look at a particular child's behavior and that evaluate a family style dining experience.

Whether choosing to use the film in one, two, or three sessions, trainers may find it helpful to stop the action in the video to give participants time to complete the exercises or to discuss their experiences. If this is done, the following breaking points are suggested:

- **"Imagine you were trying to describe the coin to someone from another country—what would you say?"** (p. 5) Stop the action here and give participants an opportunity to write down their description of a penny. The group can decide if they are going to just list adjectives or write complete sentences or thoughts in recording their observations. Also, they should decide whether to write descriptions in paragraph form or as sequential notations.

- **"Did you go so far as to comment on the fact that pennies have a metallic smell and taste?"** (p. 6)— **Optional stop.** Take a moment or two to discuss the

penny experience. How well did participants think they did?

- **"Write down what you observe."** (p. 6) Stop the action here and prepare the group for doing the observation. Suggest to participants that they write in short phrases. At the conclusion of the water table scene, stop the action once again to give participants an opportunity to finish. Before resuming the video at the line **"What did you focus on in your observation?"** (p. 6), be sure that everyone is ready to pay attention to the videotape and not busy refining their notes.

- **"When you're finished, you can compare your observation to ours."** (p. 8) Stop the action here. As with the first observation of the water table area, prepare the group for the observation. Repeat the purpose of this exercise so that everyone is focused on observing how effectively the water play activity is working. Participants should concentrate primarily on what they see the children doing. Again, stop the action at the conclusion of the water table scene to give everyone an opportunity to complete their observations before resuming the videotape.

- **"If both our observations were accurate and objective, they should indeed be very similar."** (p. 9)—**Optional stop.** Participants may welcome an opportunity to discuss how their observations compare to the narration. This may be a good point for taking questions and helping participants to process the content that has been presented thus far.

- **"Conclusions and interpretations will come later."** (p. 10) Prepare participants for this observation, making sure that they are focused on the youngest child. At the conclusion of the scene, stop the action to give everyone time to finish writing up their observation before moving on.

- **"What you've observed is not one person's opinions, but a recorded history of events."** (p. 10)—**Optional stop.** Participants may want the opportunity to share their observations of the child with the group.

- **"Let's go back to the last example we just viewed and run the camera a little longer."** (p. 11) Stop the action to prepare the group for this observation, reminding them that they will be coming into the scene at the point where the last observation left off—the child with a teddy bear was walking away from the provider and the other children reading the book *Corduroy*. At the end of the scene, stop the action once again to allow participants to finish writing. You may wish to take this opportunity to solicit the group's reaction to what has just happened. How did this later observation differ from their impressions after the first observation?

- **"Although having a purpose for your observation makes you focus your observation in a particular way, one observation can often serve all three purposes as we will see in the next scene."** (p. 12) Stop the action and prepare the group for the last observation exercise. Remind participants that they will be looking at all three purposes of observation—to learn about children, to examine their developmental progress, and to assess the effectiveness of the family dining experience. At the end of the observation, stop the action again to allow participants an opportunity to complete their observations. Use this time to ask participants how the process went. Did they feel comfortable doing the observation? How did this exercise compare with their first observation of the water table? You may wish to pose the question that comes next in the script —**"What have we learned from this observation?"** (p. 12)—to hear the group's thoughts prior to continuing the videotape.

Before Showing the Videotape

To introduce the videotape *Observing Young Children: Learning to Look, Looking to Learn* as well as the topic of observation itself, you may find it helpful to begin with an exercise that introduces the subject in an enjoyable way. The following suggestions are offered:

- **Option 1.** Hand out a blank sheet of paper and ask participants to draw a picture of a push button (touch tone) phone pad. Give the group a few minutes to complete the exercise. Then, lead participants in a discussion about the drawings:

  - How often have each of us observed a phone pad over the course of our lives?
  - How well did your memories serve you in this exercise?
  - Were you able to draw a close facsimile of a phone pad?
  - Did you remember to include the "star" and "pound" keys in your drawing?
  - Were you able to recall which letters of the alphabet were found with which numbers—or did you have to figure it out?
  - What did you include in your drawing that may have been unique to the phone pad you were recalling (for example, hold and redial buttons)?

  The important point to be brought out in this exercise is that we are always observing things in our daily lives. However, unless we focus our observations with a specific purpose in mind, observations are often faulty. In addition, observing something first-hand clearly yields more accurate results than depending on memory.

This activity is similar to the penny exercise in the videotape. For this reason, you may want to stop the videotape after the penny observation (at the line in the script in which the narrator says, **"That's because you would have been observing it first-hand with a specific purpose in mind"** (p. 6) and compare it to the participants' experience in recalling a phone pad.

Alternatively, you may wish to use the penny exercise itself as an introduction to the videotape. If so, stop the videotape at the outset of this exercise in the film (at the line in the script in which the narrator says, **"Let's try a test"** (p. 5) and let participants know they will be viewing the exercise they just completed.

- **Option 2.** Ask participants to turn to their neighbor. Allowing the group a few minutes to complete this exercise, instruct them to observe one another and then jot down what they observed. Following this, ask for volunteers to share their observations. What things did people write down? Most groups tend to report "nice" observations such as she has "nice" hair or "beautiful eyes" rather than objective observations. Ask the group why they think this happens. Can they write observations that are objective and accurate and still not hurt people's feelings?

- **Option 3.** Ask for a volunteer to stand before the group as an "observation model" and perform certain activities, such as a fingerplay or reading a story. Give the group several minutes to write down everything they observe about this person. Next, without letting the large group hear you, ask the "observation model" to go to the rest room and change three things about his or her appearance (e.g., take off a piece of jewelry, unbutton the top button of a blouse or shirt, put on lipstick, part hair from the other side). Have the model go back to the front of the room and repeat the activity. Ask the group to observe if any changes need to be made to their write-ups. After everyone has finished, lead the group in discussing the exercise:

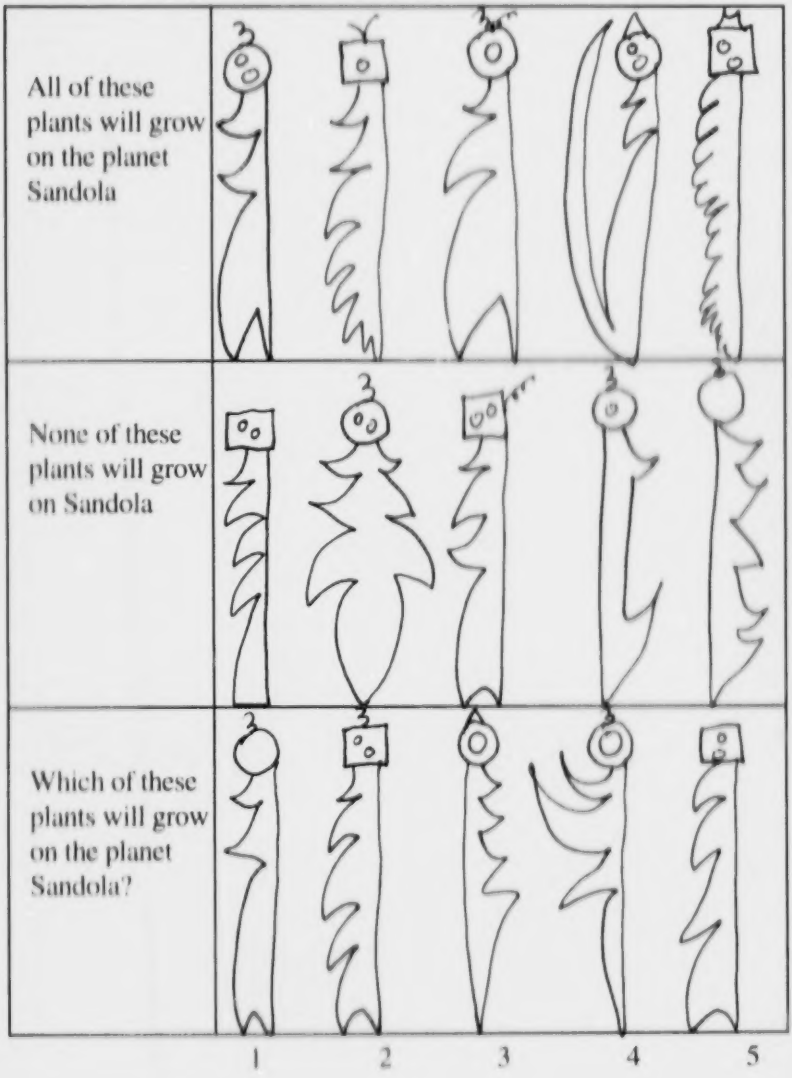
- How objective were the observations?
- How accurate?
- Did anyone have trouble discerning the changes?
- How difficult is it to *really* observe?

This might also lead to an interesting discussion on why the police have so many problems in obtaining consistent eyewitness observations of crimes.

- **Option 4.** Distribute the handout, *Observations on the Planet Sandola.* Have participants work with a partner to figure out which plants in row three will grow on the planet Sandola. After everyone has had an opportunity to work through the handout, ask for volunteers to give their solution and their reasons for arriving at a particular conclusion. The correct observation answers are # 2 and # 4. To grow on the planet Sandola, plants must be facing left, have something in their "heads" as well as something on top of their "heads." Discuss with the group what the Sandola experience teaches them about observation, such as the need to look closely, to look more than once, the importance of being objective and open to different possibilities.

HANDOUT:
OBSERVATIONS ON THE PLANET SANDOLA

SANDOLA PLANTS


All of these plants will grow on the planet Sandola
None of these plants will grow on Sandola
Which of these plants will grow on the planet Sandola?
1
2
3
4
5

Following this introduction, let participants know what the videotape will be covering, using the script that appears in Section I as your guide. You may find it helpful to give them an actual preview of the content.

After Viewing the Videotape

The best time to secure participants' honest reactions to the videotape, as well as to answer any questions that may have emerged, is right after the video ends. The following questions are offered as a starting point:

- In what ways was the videotape helpful?
- Are there some issues you still have questions about?
- Are there any topics you'd like to discuss further?
- What are possible barriers to doing this type of observation in your classroom or family child care home?
- How might you apply this information in your work?

The purpose of the initial follow-up discussion is to solicit the participants' "gut" reactions to the videotape in order to determine what support they need to become skillful observers. Use the comments offered by the group to focus the discussion. The initial discussion naturally leads to such topics as preparing for observations, how to observe unobtrusively, collecting observed information, making use of the information, and sharing the results of observations with others. In addressing these topics, you can highlight the following points.

Preparing for Observations. It is important to have a focus in conducting observations. In the first viewing of the water table scene, no purpose was specified. As a result, viewers were likely to focus on different things. The second time the water table scene was shown, however, viewers were asked to observe the water table play to

determine its effectiveness. As a result, participants attended to the type of play that took place, the children's interactions, and their use of props.

Observers in the videotape were further prepared by having clipboards and pens for recording what they saw. Moreover, observers chose vantage points for observation which were removed from the action but allowed them an unobstructed view of the children. (More about planning will be covered in the Workshops in Section III.)

Observing Unobtrusively. All of the observers in this videotape were able to observe unobtrusively. They had planned for the observation by selecting times when children could be engaged in activities that didn't require constant supervision (water play, drawing at a table, and outdoor play). In one classroom instance, another staff member worked with the children, freeing the observer from her responsibilities. This allowed the observer to complete her observation without being interrupted. As noted above, observers tried to station themselves where they could see children (and thus be there if needed) but out of the line of direct interaction.

Collecting Information. For the most part, observers in this videotape collected observational information by writing down "running records" of what they saw and heard. You might wish to take this opportunity to review with participants some of the other techniques that can be used to collect observational information, including journals, checklists, and rating scales. Additional approaches to recording running records other than writing narratives might also be explored, such as audiotaping and videotaping. (See Workshop 2 in Section III for more detailed descriptions of types of observation.) In addition, alternatives to clipboards can be introduced into the discussion such as the use of index cards, "Post-its™," gummed labels, pre-dated labels, or file folders. Techniques for making observational supplies accessible can also be reviewed. These include ideas such as wearing an apron with pockets for index cards and pens; placing nails to hold

clipboards on the walls surrounding activity areas; or setting up a prop-box-style suitcase for conducting observations (complete with clipboard, paper, pens, camera, timer, and tape recorder).

Making Use of Observations. Observations are only valuable if the information is used. As stated in the videotape, the three main purposes of observing are: to learn more about children, to measure children's progress, and to evaluate the program. You can discuss with participants how the observations illustrated in the videotape can be used to accomplish these goals. For example, how could caregivers use the observational data they collected on Desiree, Sara, Doug, and Allie to individualize their program to better serve these children? Points such as the following might be discussed:

- Desiree needs opportunities to play in quiet areas, where she won't be upset by noise and confusion;
- Sara needs lots of one-on-one time to help her cope with her sibling rivalry;
- Doug needs challenges that will refine his already developed fine motor skills;
- Allie needs a chance to play with the familiar world of puzzles in which she delights.

Sharing Observational Findings. Staff will want to share their observations with colleagues, supervisors, and parents so that children's needs are consistently met. In this way, staff and parents become true partners in early childhood education.

Reading Between the Lines

Following the general discussion, explore with the group some of the specific content presented in the video. As a vehicle for doing this, we suggest using the narration from the videotape itself. The tape can then be "frozen" at specific points while the group discusses the

content. Then you can proceed to the next point. An alternative would be to develop a handout with each statement and the list of questions to focus the discussion.

For ease of presentation, the narration is offered here in chronological order as it occurs in the videotape. Select the statements that are most relevant for your group.

"Observation is a part of everyday life." (p. 3)

- Is it true that we are always observing?
- What kinds of things or events do people tend to observe?
- In what different situations do we observe?

Comments: For most people, observation is as natural as breathing. We look at and listen to the events that unfold before us, and absorb what is happening. For the most part, people do not attempt to observe objectively what is taking place around them. How we react to what we observe is based on what our needs are, the situation, and other factors such as personal interests, temperament, and cultural background. We are all observers—but only in the loosest sense. Observation for a specific purpose involves watching and listening with a trained mind.

"You may feel that you already know a great deal about the children in your care and it's not necessary to specifically allocate time to observe them." (p. 5)

- Don't staff and providers already know what children are like without having to do any special type of observation?
- Isn't being around children all day more important than observing them?

Comments: Formal observations of children are an essential aspect of quality early childhood programs. Training and education provide solid information on normative behavior. Being with children provides information on their needs and interests. Systematic observation provides specific information on children's developmental growth and progress. All types of information are vital and cannot be substituted for one another. Also, being with children is not the same as observing them with a specific objective in mind.

"The more specific our description is, the less subject it will be to varying interpretations." (p. 6)

- What makes a description specific?
- Why do observations need to be non-judgmental?

Comments: As early childhood professionals, we must be absolutely sure we are giving children the best support and guidance we possibly can. Observational data about children's needs, growth and development must be recorded in such a way that all involved with the child have a common frame of reference. Observations that describe what is viewed and heard in straightforward, descriptive terms—without making judgments that are prejudicial—allow those using an observation to take an objective course of action that will be in the child's best interests. And the richer the objective description available, the more information available.

"Objectivity goes hand in hand with accuracy." (p. 7)

- Is it possible to be objective without being accurate?
- Is it possible to be accurate without being objective?
- How does one go about being both accurate and objective?

Comments: Accuracy and objectivity are the twin components of effective observations. While it is possible to be objective and not accurate (by avoiding judgments but getting the facts wrong or the sequence of events out-of-order) and to be accurate but not objective (by getting the sequence of events right but by drawing conclusions or making judgments), both factors are important. To be objective **and** accurate, one must record all of the facts about what a child says and does in the order in which they occurred. Nothing is omitted and as much as possible is reported—without judgment—in sequence.

"Subjective interpretations, which are your opinions, might very well be true, but they can't be supported by what is observed." (p. 7)

- What if you know why a child is acting in a certain way?
- What if you've done a number of observations and now have an appropriate explanation for what you've observed?

Comments: Interpretation is indeed an important part of the observation process. It comes, however, after several observations have been made and recorded. By objectively looking at the collected observational data you can later draw conclusions. While your original hypothesis might very well be the same conclusion you ultimately come to, you don't want your early judgments to cloud your thinking. Think of the process as similar to being on a jury. While you might be predisposed to think the defendant on trial is either guilty or innocent, you wait until you hear all the evidence before reaching a verdict. To be a good juror, you must be objective and draw a conclusion once you've weighed all that you've heard. Likewise, in making observations, the process requires that you withhold interpreting what you are observing until the end in order to ensure the validity of the process.

"From just this one observation you would have enough evaluative information to help you redesign your approach to water play and make it a more effective learning activity for the children." (p. 10)

- How can one observational experience be enough to draw a conclusion (especially given what has already been discussed)?
- What observational data indicated that change was needed?
- What changes are indicated?

Comments: The number of observations that need to be made in order to draw a conclusion vary according to the purpose of the observation. If the purpose of an observation is to determine a child's skill level, several observations are suggested in order to ensure that the observed behavior is typical. If the purpose is to see how effectively children use an activity area, then one observation could warrant a change. In this scene, we observed that the children were left to play unsupervised, that they were crowded at the table, and that each child had access to props that could be used for splashing or spraying. Using this information, one could keep the play from becoming disruptive by limiting the number of children and props permitted at the table at one time and by supervising the activity. These simple measures—based on one objective observation—are bound to make the children's water play experience more rewarding.

"Repeated observations would then allow you to determine how successful the changes you made were." (p. 10)

- When should you do such observations?
- If everything looks good, do observations still have to be repeated?

Comments: When conducting evaluative observations, it is helpful to give the children time to get used to the new set-up before observing it again. In this example, a period of a week is probably sufficient if children have regular access to water play. If problems are observed during the follow-up observation, it might be wise to do another observation to see if the problems are due to something that needs correction or to the fact that children are not yet comfortable with the new procedures. Even when things are working well, focused observations should be scheduled regularly (e.g., every month) to ensure that the area continues to work well. Because children and their play are dynamic in nature, nothing stays the same. Observation is always called for.

"How often should you be doing observations? The answer is, 'it depends.'" (p. 11)

- What factors determine how often you should be conducting observations?
- Are more observations always better than fewer?
- What should you do if you know that a particular observation is atypical?

Comments: Observations should be done, as noted above, on a regular schedule. Because most early childhood professionals also have administrative duties—as well as direct responsibilities for the children—there is a tendency to relegate observation to the "back burner." Doing so, however, short changes both the program and the children served. Even with limited time, staff need to regard observation as a regular part of their teaching duties. (This subject will be addressed again in Section III.) In general, more observations are preferable to fewer. This is because the more data one has, the more informed decisions based on these observations will be. With increased observations, those that are atypical can be regarded as just that. Observations should also be conducted at different times of the

day and on different days of the week. Children—like all of us—have good days and bad ones, good times of the day and bad ones. The more data collected, the more representative they are of the child and her behavior.

"Therefore, in making observations, it's important that you observe for a sufficient period of time, that you observe regularly, and that you repeat your observations over time." (p. 11)

- What is a sufficient period of time?
- What constitutes regular observations?
- How frequently do observations need to be repeated?

Comments: The length of an observation period, like its frequency, is dependent on a number of factors. Among these factors are whether or not there are back-up staff to work with the children during the observation period so that a teacher or provider can observe undisturbed; whether routines such as toileting or attending to an infant's needs will interfere with the planned observation; the ages of the children and their attention spans. In general, an observation should range in length from 2 to 30 minutes. If one is observing very young children, a couple of minutes may prove to be sufficient at any one time. On the other hand, if one is observing the effectiveness of an activity area or how children engage in dramatic play, then 20 minutes might be a more appropriate time frame. The purpose of an observation determines the framework for that observation. The frequency and regularity of observations, as discussed above, are also dependent on factors such as time available and the ages and needs of the children being observed. We cannot, however, state it strongly enough: observations need to be done routinely. The more often one observes, the more information one has for planning, for teaching, and for evaluating the effectiveness of one's program. In addition, research has shown that the reliability of observations increases with their frequency and length. Twenty or thirty minute observation periods

seem to yield the most reliable results (Boehm & Weinberg, 1987).

"Information gathered should be regularly shared with parents and colleagues." (p. 13)

- In what ways can parents and colleagues benefit from the results of your observations?
- Who else would need to know about the results of your observations?
- How can you ensure that the child's rights to privacy and confidentiality are being enforced?

Comments: In order for children to receive the maximum benefits of observation, it is important to share the results of observations with all those concerned about the welfare of a child. In the videotape, the provider seen in the family style dining episode discusses the results of her observation with the supervisor of the family child care system to which she belongs. With this information, the supervisor could then suggest additional ideas for helping the younger children refine the fine motor skills they need for feeding themselves. One suggestion she might have is for the middle boy to practice pouring sand so that he becomes more adept at pouring milk. Self-help boards (zipping, tying, buttoning) would be another way to both develop small muscle skills and self-help skills. In addition to administrative staff and colleagues, parents should always be up-to-date on their child's development. In the videotape, Doug's primary caregiver and Sara's provider were shown doing exactly that. As a result, the partnership with parents is strengthened and the child will be better served.

It is also appropriate to share observational results with health, mental health, and social services personnel, especially if a problem is detected. However, no one other than family members and professionals with a "need to know," should be given access to your observations. All observation results should be kept strictly confidential and stored

in locked files. Like all data collected on children, principles of confidentiality need to be strictly followed. Children and families have a right to expect that their privacy will be guarded.

III.
FOLLOW-UP WORKSHOPS

Because focused observation is the foundation of quality programming, trainers may want to spend time discussing the subject in-depth. With this in mind, the following five workshops have been developed.

1. Observing with a Different Focus in Mind

2. Using a Variety of Approaches

3. Removing Obstacles to Observation

4. Establishing Inter-Rater Reliability

5. Interpreting Observational Data

While each workshop is self-contained, the content covered in the workshops is cumulative. Therefore, a series of workshops should follow the sequence presented here. Handouts are included.

Workshop 1: Observing with a Different Focus in Mind

The videotape *Observing Young Children: Learning to Look, Looking to Learn* makes the point that observations are driven by the chosen focus for the observation. In this exercise, participants will view segments of the video they've already viewed, but this time with a different purpose in mind. Two examples are provided.

Procedure

Introduce the session by discussing the importance of having a clear focus for observations. This is especially true in conducting observations such as those shown in the video. It would be impossible for an observer to record everything that happens during a given time period. Only by focusing one's attention is it possible to do an accurate observation.

Example A: The Water Table Scene

- Go over some of the key observation scenes in the water table scene and pinpoint how the purpose of that observation dictated what the observer looked for. For example, in evaluating the water table scene, the observer concentrated on how children used props, the location of those props, the wearing of smocks, how the children's play progressed, the lack of supervision during the activity, and other such factors that affected the success of the water play activity. Ask the group how they think the observation would have proceeded had the observer been focused on something entirely different—such as the children's use of social skills.

- Brainstorm with the group the types of things observers would be looking for if the intended focus of the evaluation was to assess children's social skills. As responses are given, record them on a chart pad or chalkboard. Participants' responses are likely to include such ideas as amount and quality of verbal

interactions, types of questions and responses made, children's ability to share, the level of cooperative and parallel play evident, leadership qualities, empathy demonstrations, children's ability to take turns, joint problem solving skills, conflict resolution skills, and so forth.

- Show the water table scene again, directing the group this time to observe the children's social skills.

- At the conclusion of the exercise, ask for volunteers to read their observations aloud. Have the full group react to the observation at two levels. First, are the presented observations accurate and objective? Do they avoid making judgments and drawing conclusions? Second, how do they differ from the observation presented in the videotape? Among the differences participants are likely to point out are that by concentrating on social skills, the water play activity itself took on less importance since the observer's focus was on how children related to one another.

Example B: The Family-Style Dining Scene

- For this exercise, use the family style dining scene and have participants observe for the purpose of assessing the nutritional quality/suitability of the meal.

- First, have the group brainstorm the types of things they should be looking for in this observation. As responses are given, record them on a chart pad or chalkboard. Participants' responses may include whether or not the meal meets U.S. Department of Agriculture dietary standards for children; whether the foods are representative of the food pyramid; if foods are high in additives; whether they are fiber-rich; if foods present a choking hazard; if foods have empty calories.

- Show the family style dining scene.

- Ask for volunteers to read their observations aloud. Have the full group react to the observation at two levels. First, are the presented observations accurate and objective? Do they avoid making judgments and drawing conclusions? Second, what did they find? From their observations they can conclude that while the meal met U.S.D.A. standards, it was not a particularly wise nutritional choice. Foods such as fish sticks, chicken nuggets, and steak fingers tend to be high in fats and sodium and low in protein. Serving a lunch that is chiefly made up of fried foods adds cholesterol to the children's diets. If the group observed this provider serving a second meal, they would be struck by the same observations. While less fried foods are served at this second lunch, hotdogs are high in sodium and fats. Moreover, the hotdog pieces were not cut small enough for the baby, posing a potential choking hazard.

You can repeat the above activity, directing participants to observe segments of the videotape with other specific goals in mind. For example, the group might review the water scene with the goal of observing children's use of materials/props. The family child care dining scene could be observed to assess the children's development of self-help skills. With each observation, emphasize the link between the purpose of an observation and the resulting descriptive data.

Workshop 2: Using A Variety of Approaches

In the videotape *Observing Young Children: Learning to Look, Looking to Learn*, observers are seen writing their observations, usually on paper secured to clipboards. Viewers may desire more information on how to best record their written observations. This workshop addresses that need.

Procedure

Part I: Begin with a group discussion on the various types of observations. You may want to use overhead transparencies or write on chart pads to enhance the discussion. Among the points to be highlighted are these:

- **Diary observations**, also known as periodic overviews, are the oldest method of observation utilized. They are also one of the weakest in that they are usually unsystematic in nature and of variable reliability. In essence, diary observations are written accounts in narrative form of what goes on in a family child care home or early childhood program during a brief period of time. Entries may vary from minimal, daily commentary to detailed reports. Diary observations are most valuable if used in conjunction with other forms of recording observations.

- **Anecdotal observations** record information about a single selected event or behavior. They can range from notations about developmental milestones: "Matthew took his first step" to behavioral descriptions: "Liana invited Tiffany to join her at the sand tub." The choice of events, timeliness of the record, and the richness of detail are determined by the observer. To be most helpful, anecdotal records should be objective, factual, and followed up with supportive information.

- **Checklists** are observations based on a specific listing of items, skills, or behaviors to be performed. Completion indicates whether or not the person being observed does or does not perform the skill or behavior under question. Checklists generally require a "yes," "not yet," or "sometimes" response; they may be completed during the observation period or "after the fact." Safety and health assessments are commonly conducted using checklists.

- **Rating scales** focus on designated behaviors and require the observer to judge the degree to which the behaviors are exhibited. Rating scales usually take one of two forms—a Likert-type numerical scale or the use of descriptive phrases in ranked order.

- **Sampling observations** are chiefly used to study children's behavior. In time sampling, observers check for the presence or absence of a particular behavior during specified time intervals, say every 15 minutes. In event sampling, observers study the conditions under which a particular behavior emerges. Observations are only made when the behavior under study is present.

- **Running records** are used to collect narrative information over a predetermined length of time. During this time, the observer records as much as possible about behavior and skills. Running records are the type of observation conducted in the videotape. They provide comprehensive portraits of children and their interactions. Being open-ended, they can serve a variety of programming needs, as already noted in the videotape. Their chief disadvantage is that they can be time-consuming.

Part II: The second part of this workshop involves participants in designing their own observation form.

- Lead the group in a discussion of how one would record observations. Diaries are most frequently made in a journal. Anecdotal records are usually made on

index cards, "Post-its™," or labels and then filed in folders. Checklists and rating scales are filled in using pre-coded forms. Sampling observations are usually recorded on predrawn tally forms or worksheets. Running records, as seen in the videotape, are conducted by writing a narrative or notes. Because most observers are not sitting at a desk or table as they observe and write, clipboards are frequently used for support.

- Have the group brainstorm how they could best develop a form for recording running records. What things would it be helpful to include on a form? Some of their ideas will probably include having space to fill in the observer's name, the date, the observation times, the setting, and the purpose.

- Distribute chart paper and markers. Working in pairs or small groups, assign participants the task of developing a standard observation form that could be used to collect observational data. While there are no right or wrong solutions to this task, two examples are offered as models to start the group off.

- When participants have completed their observation forms, invite each group to present theirs. Have the full group critique each form and decide which ones they would like to try out.

- Reproduce and distribute copies of selected forms. Then have the group observe the water table scene (you may wish to change the focus of the observation to make the task more interesting) using their newly created forms.

- When the observation is completed, lead the group in a discussion of the process. Did they feel that the form they used facilitated the observation process? Are any additional changes needed? How helpful do they feel having a standardized form will be to them in their future work?

HANDOUT #1: OBSERVATION FORMS

Example 1

Observer: _____ Observation Times:
Start: _____
Date: _____ End: _____

Purpose: _____ Setting: _____

Narrative:

Example 2

Observer: _____ Day of Week: _____
Date: _____ Time of day: _____

Purpose: _____ Setting: _____

Observations in sequence:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.

Workshop 3: Removing Obstacles to Observation

Even when participants can agree on the importance of conducting focused observations as a regular part of their program, all too frequently, observation takes a back seat to the more pressing realities of working with young children. In this regard, Benjamin (1994, p. 14) writes:

> In principle, observation can be used to strengthen virtually every aspect of an early childhood program. In practice . . . taking the time to observe and record information often competes unsuccessfully with other teaching and administrative responsibilities, leading many practitioners to despair of ever finding the time or opportunity to keep careful, consistent, systematic observational records.

In order to ensure that providers and caregiving staff do indeed become regular observers, these barriers must be addressed directly. This workshop attempts to do exactly that.

Procedure:

- Lead the group in a brainstorming session on the barriers that keep them from conducting observations on a regular basis. Record responses on chart paper or a chalkboard.

- Divide the full group into small groups of four or five. Give each group several sheets of chart paper and markers for writing. Depending on the size of the training session, assign each small group one or more of these topics:

  Planning for Observation
  Organizing the Observation Process
  Record Keeping

- Allow the groups sufficient time to think about the barriers to observation that apply to their topic. Then,

ask each group to come up with a list of ways to break down those barriers. When the groups have finished, ask each small group to report back to the full group with their ideas.

- In making their presentations, groups may find some overlap between topics. That only serves to underscore the dynamic nature of the process. In discussing the groups' ideas, some of the following suggestions may emerge:

  Observation time for doing running records should be regularly scheduled into the program day. It should appear on the weekly and monthly schedules.

  Running records should be supplemented by other forms of observation such as anecdotal records, checklists, and rating scales. Time for doing these observations should also be written into the schedule.

  Arrangements can be made to have substitute staff, parent volunteers, back-up providers or supervisory staff present during scheduled observation periods so that staff are freed up to observe without having to worry about the children.

  A schedule for observing individual interest areas can be established so that all interest areas are evaluated on a rotating basis. Developmental observations might be scheduled along with completing a skills checklist about one month after children are enrolled.

  Observational materials can be assembled and left at predetermined observation stations to facilitate their use.

  A prop box or suitcase containing observational materials can be prepared to facilitate the process.

Observational goals for running records should be set ahead of time. All questions that staff wish to have answered by the observation should be brainstormed so that each observation has a specific focus.

Parent volunteers and even children can be enlisted in assisting in some types of observations. For example, parents can complete simple checklists to keep track of how many children use an interest area or to track the number of children who play with blocks, use computers, etc. Children can keep track of their use of activity areas or play materials by moving markers, putting plastic chips in a bank, or using other concrete counters.

Staff may wish to wear clothing with pockets containing index cards or paper plus writing materials so that they can record unscheduled observations of noteworthy events.

Observation schedules should be periodically reviewed and updated to conform to the realities of real life early childhood programs.

Observation results should be stored in confidential files and/or portfolios that only those with a "need to know" have access to.

Developmental observations can be transferred to a skills matrix that will be used for individualizing instruction.

Parent conferences can be clustered and arranged to follow observations so that the results are effectively shared.

- Following the presentations, have participants develop individual "action plans" that they will use to ensure that formal observation and documentation gets more than token acceptance in their classroom or family child care home.

Workshop 4: Establishing Inter-Rater Reliability

In the videotape *Observing Young Children: Learning to Look, Looking to Learn*, the statement is made that in order to be effective, observations must be objective and unbiased. This workshop is geared toward helping participants develop this skill.

Procedure:

- Begin with a discussion of this line from the videotape, **"One way to determine if you are really objective is to ask yourself, 'Am I describing things in such a way that anyone viewing the same scene would describe it in the exact same way?' "** (p. 7) Ask the group why they think it's important that everyone view things exactly the same. The film *Rashomon* by the famous Japanese director Akira Kurosawa is a timeless example of how easy it is for people to see the same event in completely different ways. Another example is the anecdote of how three blind men would describe an elephant according to the part of its body each one felt.

- Write the word "reliability" on a chart pad or chalkboard, explaining to the group that reliability is what assures us that we are being objective. In conducting observations, reliability refers to our ability to record information in such a way that if we were to re-record our observation, it would be nearly identical to the one we just made and substantially the same as the one someone else viewing the same scene would make. Consistency over time is known as **intra-rater reliability**. Consistency with others is known as **inter-rater reliability**.

- Ask the group how they think they could best establish both types of reliability. In their responses the group will likely note that **intra-rater reliability** comes through practice such as that gleaned through use of the videotape. Having a system for organizing

observations, learning to use words that are objective, and having a predetermined focus for the observation all support the development of high intra-rater reliability. **Inter-rater reliability** is also gained through practice and familiarity. Closed-ended observations such as checklists and rating scales are comparatively easy tools for establishing inter-rater reliability. Participants can calculate their inter-rater reliability by working with a partner and together completing a close-ended instrument. Each person should fill out the form independently. When they are done, each item should be examined to see where the observers agreed and where they disagreed. Dividing the number of items on which there was agreement by the number of possible items on the instruments gives one an inter-rater reliability score. Generally, there should be at least 85% agreement between observers.

- Ask the group how inter-rater reliability can be maximized when doing open-ended observations such as running records. Answers might include the following:

  By clearly structuring the observation on a specific focus or goal.

  By brainstorming the key variables related to this goal before conducting an observation. (For example, if looking at children's use of social skills, delineating what skills are involved ahead of time such as sharing, taking turns, waiting for someone to complete a thought or turn, helping another, expressing empathy.)

  Having a predetermined system (or form) for recording information.

  Specifying a set time for the observation (time of day as well as from when to when). [N.B., Research has shown that reliability increases when the observation time is increased, both in terms of frequency and duration. Boehm and Weinberg

(1987) recommend that three observation periods of 30 minutes each or four observational periods of 20 minutes each be used to obtain maximum inter-rater reliability.]

- Challenge the group to improve their inter-rater reliability by doing a shared observation. Have the group divide into pairs. Give them the assignment of observing the training room. Each paired group will decide the focus of their observation, the specific behaviors or materials to be focused on, how they are going to record their observations and the length of time they will spend observing the room (up to a maximum of 30 minutes).

- After the pairs have finished their observations, give them time to compare the results. How similar were their running records? To assist them in this task, distribute *Handout #2: Gaining Inter-Rater Reliability*. Give the paired groups time to assess and critique what they have done. Then, ask them to select one of their observations or to compile a new version which they feel is accurate, objective **and** reliable.

- Have the pairs read their observations aloud to the full group and then comment on the process. What have they learned about inter-rater reliability? While obtaining a reliability score on open-ended observations is not usually done, observers can put practices into place that will maximize reliability and ensure that their observations are consistent.

HANDOUT #2: GAINING INTER-RATER RELIABILITY

1. Did you focus the observation?
2. Did you precisely define the behaviors, events or materials to be observed?
3. Did you develop a standard format for collecting the data?
4. Did you schedule the observation for a sufficient period of time (remembering that reliability goes up with time and then levels off at 20-30 minutes)?
5. Did you use as many of your senses as were appropriate in making your observation?
6. Did you record your observations accurately? In the sequence in which they occurred?
7. Did you record your observations objectively?
8. Did you avoid interpreting the data and drawing conclusions?
9. Did you feel well trained and confident?
10. Do you plan to repeat the observation? When?

Workshop 5: Interpreting Observational Data

Training time thus far has been devoted to ensuring that collected observational data are valid (accurate and complete) and reliable (consistent). Now it's time in this culminating workshop to make use of these well-collected observational data.

Procedure:

- Begin the workshop with an overview of the topic: how to interpret collected observational data. Explain to the group that interpretation is a two-part process. The first step is to make **inferences** based on the observational data. Janice Beaty, writing in *Observing Development of the Young Child* (1986, p. 25) defines an inference as "a statement considered to be true—tentatively at least—because it is founded upon a previous statement believed to be true." Because inferences grow out of objectively recorded information, they themselves are objective in nature.

- Give the group practice in making inferences. For example, a valid inference of the observation *"After Mary spilled some juice while pouring it for snack, she went to the kitchen, got a sponge and mopped up the spill"* is *"Mary has learned the self-help skill of wiping spills."* A faulty inference would be, *"Mary is accident prone."* Ask participants for examples of observational data from the running observations they have completed. Then, working as a group, have participants designate both valid and faulty inferences.

- Explain to the group that the second step in interpreting data is to draw a **conclusion**. More subjective than inferences, conclusions are reasoned judgments. They may be based on known educational theories, past experience as well as current and historical observations. In drawing conclusions one looks for patterns and then makes an "educated guess." Because conclusions are based on both repeated observations and

objectively determined inferences, they are our best attempt at explaining what we've observed. Obviously, the more objectively observations were recorded, the more valid conclusions will be.

- To give the group practice in interpreting data, re-run one or more of the observation scenes in the videotape *Observing Young Children: Learning to Look, Looking to Learn,* (the water table scene, the children being read to by the provider, or the family style dining scene probably lend themselves best to this exercise). Then, working in groups of two or three, ask participants to interpret what they have observed.

- Have the groups share their conclusions, including the inferences they were based on.

- Conclude the workshop with a discussion of the role that interpretation of observational information plays in their programs. When should they be interpreting data? Should they consult others (colleagues, supervisors, parents, for example) before drawing conclusions? Should interpretations be kept with student records—or should only the uninterpreted observations be maintained in files? Because interpretation has a subjective component, should any special ethical standards govern their use in early childhood programs?

IV. RESOURCES

Almy, Millie and Celia Genishi. *Ways of Studying Children.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1979.

Beaty, Janice. *Observing the Development of the Young Child*, 2nd Edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1986. Revised 1990.

Benjamin, Ann C. "Observations in Early Childhood Classrooms: Advice from the Field." *Young Children*, September 1994, 14-20.

Boehm, Ann E. and Richard A. Weinberg. *The Classroom Observer: Developing Observation Skills In Early Childhood Settings.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1987.

Cohen, Dorothy H., Virginia Stern, and Nancy Babalan. *Observing and Recording Behavior of Young Children.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1983.

Curriculum Resources from Teaching Strategies, Inc.

***The Creative Curriculum® for Early Childhood*, 3rd Edition**
390 pages ($39.95). A developmentally appropriate curriculum for 3 to 5 year olds that shows how teachers build curriculum around the environment using ten interest areas: Blocks, House Corner, Table Toys, Art, Sand and Water, Library, Music and Movement, Cooking, Computers, and Outdoors.

A Guide for Supervisors and Trainers on Implementing the Creative Curriculum®, 240 pages ($29.95). Includes supervision strategies, workshop outlines, and handouts for training sessions on each of the modules in *The Creative Curriculum®*.

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Activity Posters. Four colorful posters, one for each age group, ($18.50). Serve as a quick reference for providers and staff in any child care setting. They give examples of activities that help children develop socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically.

Constructing Curriculum for the Primary Grades, 236 pages ($39.95). Provides both the rationale and practical suggestions for organizing a challenging curriculum for children in grades one through three.

Audiovisual Materials

The Creative Curriculum®, a 37-minute videotape ($99.50). Shows how children learn in several interest areas in *The Creative Curriculum®* and how teachers set the stage and encourage their learning.

The NEW Room Arrangement as a Teaching Strategy, a 15-minute slide/videotape and *User's Guide* ($35.00). Presents concrete ideas for arranging early childhood classrooms to support positive behavior and learning.

Caring and Learning. A 23-minute videotape and *User's Guide* ($42.00). Shows how four family child care providers set up their homes and engage children of all ages and abilities in the nine activities: Blocks, Dramatic Play, Toys, Art, Sand and Water, Books, Music and Movement, Cooking, and Outdoors.

Competency-Based Training Materials

The "*Caring for . . .*" series:

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Caring for Preschool Children
Caring for Children in Family Child Care
Caring for Children in School-Age Programs

Each of the four sets in the "Caring for . . ." series are comprised of 13 modules in two volumes ($34.95 per volume) which correspond to the Child Development Associate (CDA) Competency Standards. Volume I covers Safe, Healthy, Learning Environment, Physical, Cognitive, and Communication. Volume II includes Creative, Self, Social, Guidance, Families, Program Management, and Professionalism.

Trainer's Guides ($23.95). Each of the "Caring for . . ." sets has a *Trainer's Guide* that offers suggestions for implementing the program and providing feedback to staff. They include knowledge assessments, answer sheets, observation forms with checklists, and tracking forms.

Observing Young Children: Learning to Look, Looking to Learn

Observation forms the basis of all developmentally appropriate programming. This 30-minute videotape helps new and experienced early childhood educators:

- Learn about children so they can individualize their program
- Evaluate their program so they can adjust the environment, the curriculum, or both
- Measure children's progress and their acquisition of skills

The tape is appropriate both for self-instruction or group training sessions. The narrator describes objective observation techniques, how to apply them, and then walks viewers through several practice observations. The *Trainer's Guide* which accompanies the video includes the full script and suggestions for presenting the videotape.

* * *

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